Action Research Project Summary

Development of a "Wholistic" Accountability Framework for the Native Literacy Stream

Peterborough Native Learning Program   Peterborough, ON

Research Question

Can we design a tool that will assist Native literacy programs in reporting on and meeting provincial accountability requirements?

We were concerned about Native literacy programs' record of being accountable to Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU). We hypothesized that non-compliance with accountability measures and the ripple effects of not meeting performance measures were key factors that contributed to these unacceptable results for Native literacy programs:

- programs being placed on probation
- sponsors giving up on programs; some taken over by mainstream sponsors
- reductions in funding of program core budgets
- an inordinate number of programs having trouble keeping staff
- lack of community support and recognition of the program as a valuable service

Objectives

The accountability improvement tool was to meet the following objectives:

- Contribute to an improved understanding among Native literacy providers of accountability and the terminology that is used in MTCU's *Program Monitoring Report* (*PMR*)
- Increase literacy program coordinators' confidence in articulating the work being done
- Provide stronger evidence of compliance with funder regulations
- Provide opportunities for Native literacy coordinators to tell "stories" of their program's successes and challenges, using their own words
- Suggest other practical uses of the information gathered (e.g, to report program results and challenges to Chief and Council or to Board of Directors of the Friendship Centre)

Team Members & Responsibilities

Project Manager	*Pat Powell-Owen*, Executive Director, Peterborough Native Learning Centre Overall project management; assisted with site visits; provided on-going support to participating programs; worked with research friend on tool development
Practitioner-Researcher	*Karen McClain*, Literacy Practitioner, Peterborough Native Learning Centre Drafted literature review; conducted site visits; facilitated sharing circles; trained participant programs in use of revised tool; analyzed findings; and liaised with Board of Directors
Funder	*Harold Alden*, ON Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Offered feedback regarding use of MTCU's *PMR* in the research
Research Friend	*Susan Hardie*, Independent Consultant Offered feedback at all steps— initial, interim, final including providing samples of logic models, photo releases, research briefs, etc.

Methods

1. **Conducted research and developed a tool** to help on-reserve Native literacy programs to better explain their challenges and successes to funder representatives. The tool interpreted the standardized program-monitoring tool in a Native context. The team drew on research by Bell (2004) and Fulford (2007)[1] that identified eight key success factors of Aboriginal schools. These are success factors and their corresponding categories from the funder's monitoring tool:

Bell and Fulford's 8 Key Indicators of Aboriginal School Success	MTCU's *PMR* Categories
Governance and Leadership	Administrative and Financial Accountability
Assessment for Learning Teaching and Learning	Program Delivery
Culture and History, Curriculum	Programs are not assessed for addressing this topic on the MTCU form.
Programs, School Climate	Community Links/Learners' Feedback
Aboriginal Language	No comparable category. MTCU does not fund Aboriginal language literacy.

2. **Piloted the new tool with four Native literacy programs**
Eight programs known to the researchers that were delivering literacy and basic skills (LBS) on reserve were invited by email to participate. The first three to respond were selected, along with one more program, Moosonee[2] During the first visit, the team introduced the research project, presented the draft accountability tool and helped the participants see how it could be used throughout the project and after. The team also worked to engage the Native literacy program sponsors (Chiefs and Councils, Friendship Centre Executive Directors) and communities in the research work.

3. **Returned to the programs four to six months later to gather input** on how and where the tool worked, or did not work, and to learn if the tool helped literacy providers to better capture the successes and challenges of Native literacy work. Two of the four programs received three visits, one received two visits and the fourth dropped out after an initial visit.

4. **Made adjustments to the tool and analyzed findings**

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[1] David Bell et al (2004), *Sharing Our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling*, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education/SAEE (Kelowna, BC), and George Fulford (2007), *Sharing Our Success: More Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling*, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education/SAEE (Kelowna, BC).
[2] Moosonee is not a First Nation, but experiences similar challenges due to isolation. The literacy needs of Moosonee are unique. Over 90% of the population is Aboriginal.

Challenges
- The eight key indicators of success are interconnected. Taking a model that is holistic in nature and relating it to the more linear model currently in use has been difficult.
- The needs of the participating programs were much greater than expected, requiring extensive support between site visits. The Peterborough Action Research Team (ART) found it challenging to respond to the numerous requests for assistance.
- Determining what kind of help to offer, when our community, personalities and expertise are very different from the participant programs sometimes led us to wonder if we were suggesting the right courses of action, e.g. to recruit learners, or deal with community image
- Communications with participating programs: They were quick to ask for help, but slow to respond to requests from the team.
- We underestimated the degree to which the programs needed to become more accountable, and were challenged to address this. We have no authority to do so, but felt the need to help them understand the importance of meeting MTCU standards. We tried to convey how putting the systems we suggested in place would make life easier for them, and bring programs in line with funder expectations.
- Increased service demands at the Peterborough Native Learning Program made it difficult to juggle day-to-day literacy program tasks and ART-related work during the last four months.
- Questions to the research friend generated additional questions. A face-to-face meeting could have helped, but she moved to another province.
- The funder's representative changed due to an overlap in roles.
- We were asked by the funder not to make additions to the province's *Program Monitoring Report (PMR)* as it is an official document. To comply and to clarify our intent, we devised a logic model to help describe our process and outcomes. We shared this with the funding representative and it helped us stay on track. We also adjusted the tool so participating programs understand it does not replace the *PMR.*
- Some of the expectations of our funder, *Connecting the Dots* (CtD), were unclear or were revised when work had already been completed, for example, the outline for this report.
- Attending scheduled teleconferences with the other four ARTs for updates was not always possible because of time constraints. Sometimes the other projects did not join the calls and it felt more productive to do the check-in/updates directly with the CtD's project manager.

Findings
▪ Programs benefit from and appreciate the enhanced interpretations and explanations of funder expectations.

Our two-track action research approach of piloting an accountability improvement tool with interpretations and explanations of funder expectations and providing practical support worked well. This confirms that it is highly beneficial to have an additional layer of interpretation that includes face-to-face assistance and on-going phone and email support. Discussion of this need has been ongoing between the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC)[3] and MTCU. Now we have evidence of the benefits of such an approach.

▪ Programs benefit from practical, hands-on, community engaged assistance to help them respond to accountability expectations.

With staff turnover in the Native stream, it would be helpful to use a team approach to respond to accountability expectations. It could include a representative of the sponsor group (i.e. the Band or Friendship

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[3] Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC) is the provincial literacy network responsible for training, advocacy and support for its Native literacy program members and to act as liaison between the programs and MTCU.

Centre) and a reliable program volunteer. Discussion about the importance of community involvement was introduced through the Sharing Circles.

▪ The categories to measure performance need to be expanded to better reflect the expectations and priorities of Aboriginal communities.

Some indicators of success that are very important to Aboriginal people appear to be missing from the current method of measuring the performance of Native literacy programs. These performance indicators focus on culture, history and Aboriginal language. Community members expect that they will learn about their culture, history and language at their local Native literacy program. The programs involved in this project are accountable to their sponsors and communities as much as they are accountable to the funder.

Voices from the Research

> Native literacy practitioners told the researchers that they have more confidence and greater understanding when it comes to demonstrating they are meeting standards, Moreover, even when they are not, they are better able to identify why and how to address the issue. The field consultants have noticed that visits are less stressful for those who have participated in the pilot project that developed this tool. They have also reported that conversations around accountability have changed for the better. With these positive results, we believe this tool's use can go beyond the one-person Native literacy agency.

Outputs

- A tool that:

    o allows programs to describe the ways in which they are accountable to the multiple stakeholders to whom they report: the funder (MTCU), the sponsor (the Band or Friendship Centre Board of Directors), and the community/learners
    o explains/translates the terminology in MTCU's *PMR* and provides suggestions on how the programs can demonstrate that they have delivered what the funder expects
    o encourages the literacy coordinator to describe all support received by the program
    o includes reminders to the coordinator to report contributions from all stakeholders and the accompanying expectations that might accompany such contributions
    o includes categories to measure performance that better reflect the expectations and priorities of Aboriginal communities

- Innovative, community-appropriate strategies to help increase participant numbers and contact hours

Outcomes

- A greater understanding among enrolled programs of accountability, how to use the *PMR* and why and how MTCU collects data in the designated categories
- Increased confidence among Native literacy workers in interacting with provincial representatives — talking about their work and how they plan to address possible shortfalls
- Improvements in the organization of statistics and program information, and in timely response to identified action items
- Increase in the numbers of learners and contact hours in some of the enrolled programs
- Increased understanding of Native literacy services by community members
- Increased awareness by MTCU field consultants regarding the complexities of operating Native literacy programs on reserve and in isolation